

A Candid Reality on Film: *United 93*

Samantha Morganroth (smorganr@trinity.edu)¹
Department of Communication, Trinity University

Time is standing still but just for a moment. The theater is dead silent. The audience is frozen in their seats. The screen reads: "Dedicated to the memory of all those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001". The words disappear and everything is black. Moviegoers eventually begin to vacate the theater, many wiping away tears, while trying to bring themselves back to reality. There is minimal conversation, and much of the movement is robotic. As the audience tries to make sense out of the disturbing footage they have just witnessed, facial expressions show a distressed nature unlike any I have witnessed before. No one really seems to know what to say. I definitely did not. This was the sensation I experienced just after viewing the film *United 93* (Greengrass, 2006) for my first time, this past summer, at a local movie theater in Portland Oregon. I suspect that my experience was probably comparable to that of many others who saw the movie in theaters when it was released this past summer.

The film *United 93* was written and directed by Paul Greengrass. It tells the tragic story of one of the four commercial airliners hijacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001. The film attempts to present a realistic reconstruction of the experiences that day, through the perspectives of the passengers on flight United 93, and through the men and women on the ground working in air traffic control centers during the attacks. In the film *United 93* Greengrass constructs a docudrama in which film viewers can experience a seemingly realistic, objective, and true-to-life recreation of the events of September 11th; while at the same time honoring the tragedy's victims. However one must also consider the implications which arise due to Greengrass' goals for the film. The film displays as much truth as is known for certain, but also resorts to hypothesizing the

unknown. The experience of film viewers is a realistic one, but we must remember that no complete or absolute truth is possible in the telling of this story, because there were no survivors of the actual experience to give an exact recount of what happened. Greengrass accomplishes his goals for the film through a skillful use of cinematography, detailed and in-depth research, utilizing aspects of both observational and poetic modes of film making, paying careful attention to character development, and through the appropriate use of sensitive and emotional detail. The film presents a disturbing yet candid view of the terror our country experienced on September 11, 2001. Greengrass' two primary goals throughout the film were "...to dignify the memory of those they were portraying... and to arrive at... a believable truth of what happened during the 91-minute flight" (Universal Studios, 2006). In my opinion Greengrass undeniably achieves both, and in addition creates a film with an artistic eloquence that has yet to be matched by any other film dealing with the events of September 11th.

Paul Greengrass proves himself as an experienced and polished film maker through his proficient use of cinematography in the filming of *United 93*. The cinematography used in *United 93* is one of the main contributors to the realistic and true to life feeling depicted throughout the film. During most of the film Greengrass uses loose framing. This means that most shots give the audience a view of the entire setting. The film seems more realistic when the film maker is not pulling your attention to one defining focus (using tight framing), but rather, allows the viewer to take in everything going on in and around the subjects. The use of loose framing occurs mainly in the airport and military base scenes and allows the audience to feel as though they are not being shielded from any part of the chaotic experience. The audience is not told where to look but is simply immersed in the environment.

The quality of sound is also very effective in making the film seem as realistic as possible. The background noise is barely muffled, and the pitch of the sound seems to rise and fall naturally and appropriately in accordance with what is occurring onscreen. No one seems to have a microphone or any other device to aid their voice or volume. In most Hollywood films, because of the use of microphones and sound devices, most or all sound has an equal quality and volume which is very unrealistic.

The lighting used also contributes to the realistic feeling of the documentary. When lighting is consistent throughout, a documentary can seem very

¹ Samantha Morganroth, an undergraduate communication student at Trinity University, wrote this term paper in December 2006 for a course on documentary film. The course was taught by Professor Aaron Delwiche. Student papers are available online at <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwiche/documentary/guides.html>

inauthentic. Greengrass uses a mix of low key lighting and high key lighting. He uses low key lighting in the air traffic control center and military center scenes. "These scenes take place in dark, crowded, low-ceilinged rooms filled with dumpy men" (Burr, 2006). Other scenes, such as the scenes on the plane, were filmed using high key lighting giving a more natural appearance and closely simulating what an early morning flight, like United 93, would look like to its passengers.

One of the most effective uses of cinematography in *United 93* is Greengrass' use of camera shake. As he films the more chaotic and distressing moments of the hijacker's take-over, the passenger's revolt, and the eventual impact of the plane into the ground, the camera shakes violently. This shaking makes the viewer almost nauseous but at the same time gives the viewer the sensation that he or she is a passenger on the tumultuous plane. The shake of the camera also helps to recreate a feeling of panic and terror, making the action appear more authentic to the viewer. Greengrass displays a "...dynamic use of the camera.... It's handheld and thrust into the tumult... this is the essence of Greengrass' art- we see what we need to see" (Denby 2006). Greengrass uses cinematography to help aid the realistic feeling of the documentary; however, he is at the same time very careful not to use excessive cinematography. The use of form cuts, wipes, and special transitions will characteristically cause a viewer to sense that the film has been touched up too much, and it no longer seems valid or authentic.

Greengrass used in-depth and detailed research in making *United 93* and because of this he is able to present viewers with an authentic experience as the movie unfolds. The cast went through an intense pre shooting rehearsal process before any filming took place. This involved the isolation of the cast in order to remove them "from the culture where the impact of 9/11 is still keenly and painfully felt..." (Universal Studios, 2006). For this purpose Greengrass also opted to film outside of the United States.

After being assigned roles, each actor was given files containing detailed information about the specific person they were cast to portray. The files they received included photos, descriptions of the person's general behavior and likeness, and general facts about the person (such as their reason for traveling, what they were wearing, etc.). After meticulously studying this information, many of the actors had the opportunity to meet with, or have phone conversations with the victim's families. One

actress met the sister of the character she was going to portray. The victim's sister played the actress a tape, of her own sister's phone call made from the airplane during the disaster. The actress was astonished at the willingness of the victim's sister to aid in establishing such authenticity for the film. "...it will haunt me for the rest of my life" reveals the actress after hearing the tape, but she also notes how grateful she was of the information shared with her (Universal Studios, 2006). The actors were well aware of the "incredibly tender territory that [had] been entrusted in [them]" (Universal Studios, 2006) and both they and the victim's families cooperated in an incredible show of understanding and respect along with a willingness to participate in the painstakingly difficult process of reenactment.

Once the actors had grasped an understanding of their roles, the crew engaged in improvisational reenactments aboard a Boeing 757 that was constructed specifically for that purpose. These improvisations were used to satisfy Greengrass' "goal of [discovering] the 'plausible truth'" (Universal Studios, 2006). The improvisations were controlled by call outs of what would be occurring in real-time during the flight. Greengrass explains his intentions and reasoning for these improvisational reenactments: "We just have no way of knowing the events that happened on the plane. There would be no way to script it in a way that would end up seeming realistic... If it's not going to be truthful and it's not going to seem real, there there's just no point in doing it" (Universal Studios, 2006). Greengrass attempted to create a film that progressed in as close to real time as possible. "In the movie, once the flight is aloft, Greengrass sticks to real time, and the passing minutes have an almost demonic urgency. This is true existential film making: there is only the next instant, and the one after that... As far as possible this movie plays it straight" (Denby, 2006). While watching the film the audience experiences the tragedies unfold in real time, which allows the audience a very involved and interactive experience in the events.

There was also a great deal of practical and factual research that went into the making of *United 93*. Without the extensive amounts of detailed research Greengrass never would have been able to create such an authentic replication of the experience on flight United 93. The interviews and personal willingness to share information contributed noticeably to this effect. The research was tedious, and took significant amounts of time; however it was an extremely worthwhile endeavor. "Greengrass and his researchers called upon a myriad of sources,

conducting countless hours of face-to-face interviews with families of the 40 passengers and crew, members of the 9/11 commission, flight controllers and other military and civilian personnel who took part in the events of the day.... More than 100 interviews were conducted... valuable information was gained from the 9/11 commission report... [and] members of that commission advised on the film prior to start of filming..." (Universal Studios, 2006). While the film may not have been completely accurate, Greengrass has been pronounced by many movie reviewers to have achieved a "superbly precise" film (Denby, 2006).

United 93 was created using aspects reminiscent of both the observational and poetic modes of documentary. However the film does not seem to fit perfectly into either category. The film seems to fit much more appropriately in the docudrama genre. As defined by Alan Rosenthal, a credible writer of media and film (who is quoted in Rosteck's article) a docudrama is a film which is: "based on or inspired by reality, by the lives of real people, or by events that happened in the recent or not too distant past, and they 'would seem to have a higher responsibility to accuracy and to truth than does fiction...'" (Rosteck, 2001). Basically, a docudrama is a film in which fact meets poetic license. Docudramas use "documentary style reporting" combined with a "high degree of constructedness" (Nichols, 2001, 23). A docudrama is arguably the most effective form of documentary for Greengrass to use to create *United 93*. It is hard to imagine a more convincing form of film where the information could have been presented in such a poignant fashion. It is arguable that docudramas have a greater effect on society than traditional documentary forms which often leave the audience much less affected. Rosteck reminds us that the "docudrama is available to do social work where traditional, more conventional forms [of documentary] cannot" (Rosteck, 2001). This reveals why Greengrass specifically chose to use this form of presentation. A traditional documentary could never have accomplished Greengrass' goals because it would require footage and information that just is not available. A docudrama allows for an artistic recreation, and does not require a factual dissection. By creating a docudrama, Greengrass was able to present his ideas in a popular fashion that was well received by audiences. In addition, audiences were able to identify and connect with much of the experience presented. While a Hollywood film allows for this same effect, a docudrama allows the information to be accepted as valid as well, because it is presented as reminiscent of a documentary film.

While *United 93* may not be considered a poetic or observational documentary, it undeniably has many aspects that are characteristic of both. Observational documentaries are known for "representing the lived experience of actual people that we happen to witness" (Nichols, 2001, 111). This is precisely the effect that Greengrass attempts to create. The observational film wants to give the viewer "the impression that the filmmaker is not intruding on the behavior of others" (Nichols, 2001, 111), this is yet another common characteristic of observational documentaries that Greengrass attempts to utilize. At no point in the film does Greengrass appear, nor does he take on the role as an overriding narrator. "Since the observational filmmaker adopts a peculiar mode of presence 'on the scene' in which he or she appears invisible..." (Nichols, 2001, 112) this allows a viewer to establish the impression of an objective and factual documentary- the impression that many *United 93* viewers develop. When there is an overriding narrator, audiences tend to assume that the information presented by that narrator is both biased and opinionated. *United 93* also presents ideals from the poetic mode of documentaries. The poetic mode of documentary "...stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than... acts of persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped" (Nichols, 2001, 103). Greengrass attempts to create this type of documentary as he portrays the experiences of the day, rather than attempting to persuade the audience to believe in any political or argumentative thought. "*United 93* works hard to stay apolitical; viewers hoping for flag-waving on the right, finger pointing on the left, or all-American martyrdom in the middle will come away disappointed" (Burr, 2006). Personal opinions and subjectivity were not presented in this film. "The movie contains no politics. No theory. No personal chit-chat. No patriotic speeches. We never see the big picture" (Ebert, 2006). This type of objectivity gives the film credibility because no one person's opinions or personal emotions are being forced upon, or even really presented to the viewer. Rather the viewer is left to make their own decisions and opinions on the characters and events simply based on fact and situation.

The careful attention paid to the character development in this movie was very important in establishing the true-to-life and objective film Greengrass wanted to create. As already noted in the discussion of the research done in preparation for this film, one can tell how much effort was put into establishing genuine portraits of the actual victims. Greengrass had many of the air traffic controllers

play themselves; characters such as Ben Sliney- who plays a major role in the film (as he did in the events that actually took place). “Using Sliney and other air traffic controllers as the audience’s surrogates was a stroke of genius on Greengrass’ part...” (Hornaday, 2006). For other characters no big name actors were cast. No familiar faces which viewers already have associations with, opinions on, or connections to were used in the film either. This also led to a very authentic anti Hollywood type feel. Another man plays his own brother (who was a victim on flight 93) in the film, which provides a very interesting and almost disturbing dynamic. While it is clearly an impossible task to create an exact replica of what happened on September 11, 2001, Greengrass attempts to come as close as possible through his choice of characters that are as true to life as he can find.

The characters in *United 93* are not personalized. Details in their lives are not made up or even embellished, and very few things about them as individuals are revealed. The film does not go into any personal background on any of the victims. We witness small-talk and insignificant conversations between the characters, but as a viewer we do not develop much personal connection with the characters except that we can identify with them as Americans. “What we know about the passengers on United 93 is exactly what we would know if we had been on the plane and sitting across from them: nothing, except for a few details of personal appearance” (Ebert, 2006). This contributes to Greengrass’ ability to give his audience a more realistic experience.

There are also no heroes in the story; no one person that is regarded as a savior, nor any that are deserving of our gratitude. The terrorists are also vilified to a much lesser degree than in many other representations or films concerning the events of September 11th. This also serves to provide an objective and realistic feeling to *United 93*. The film is objective in that it does not force opinions or connections to specific characters upon its audiences.

Greengrass’ final effort to create a realistic, objective, and true to life recreation through *United 93* was his use of sensitive and appropriate emotion and emotional detail. The emotion is “Tough, compassionate, [and] devoid of false sentiment or cheap spectacle...” (Hornaday, 2006). At many times when the events of the film could become overly emotional or exaggerated Greengrass responds with a display of restraint and tact- which goes a long way in creating a docudrama that is sensitive and

does not exploit the tragedies surrounding flight 93. Even the quote “Lets roll” from passenger Beamer, which has been proven to be a quote of true fact, was not used by Greengrass as a “signature tagline” and was “thankfully underplayed” (Hornaday, 2006). Though many viewers went into the movie theater with skeptical and unsure mindsets, Greengrass found viewers to be pleasantly surprised. “...You come out feeling that the filmmakers have done the right thing by these people, and by this day” (Burr, 2006).

With all its redeeming qualities as a film, *United 93* is nevertheless still a painful and almost unbearably devastating film to experience. The grave tragedies of September 11th, which are presented so realistically, make for a difficult, but in my opinion, very necessary viewing. We can not forget the tragedies that occurred that day, nor should we. However we still must use great caution in the ways in which we do remember them. The film has experienced some negative review and doubt among viewers and critics. The main concern many critics have with the film, aside from the emotional argument of it being “too soon”, is the film’s claim to have created a realistic recreation. Many argue that Greengrass’ attempt was literally impossible. The information necessary to restate the story could only come from the passengers and crew aboard the plane- which fatally crashed leaving no survivors to retell the story. Critics such as Amy Biancolli refer to the film as “based on fact... but unavoidably fictionalized...” (Biancolli). Meaning, the film had noble intent to be factual and realistic, but sheer reality would not allow for the creation of such a film. While this argument does have logic to it, based on the information that was obtained: from the black box that was recovered, the 9/11 Commission report, family members of victims, intense research, and other additional sources, it is arguable still that Greengrass does in fact have the right to claim a “true-to-life” recreation. He never says that the experience viewers will have is an exact replica, or that it is undeniably, 100 percent factual. Rather the argument is that it is a realistic and a true-to-life recreation. So while we can never know for sure what transpired, nor can we ever recreate an exact version of the experience on flight 93, we can, as Greengrass has proved, make very respectable attempts- attempts that have every right to be referred to as realistic recreations.

Despite opposition, and argument to the absolute validity of the story, the film proves itself a success in achieving the filmmaker’s original goals, to create a dignified memory and realistic true to life recreation of the events of September 11, 2001. True

to life does not mean exact, it means an extremely realistic representation, and that is exactly what Greengrass created using as much factual information and research as was available. David Beamer, the father of a victim on flight 93 tells Larry King in an interview "I thought the film was very, very well done. Paul Greengrass and his staff of researchers and the cast and crew set about to tell this story, a real story that really needs to be told, and their intent was to do it with authenticity and accuracy. And I know that we feel that they really got the story right. And for that, we are both grateful and relieved" (King, 2006). This opinion of David Beamer again affirms Greengrass' success at achieving his goals when creating *United 93*.

After leaving the theater, the entire way home from the movie, my brother and I sat in silence. He shifted around the car awkwardly as I tried to conceal the fact I had been crying. The disturbing images of the film would remain in my mind long after the credits finished. To sum up my experience and my opinion of the film, I agree unequivocally with the words of Washington Post writer Ann Hornaday, "*United 93* is a great movie, and I hated every minute of it" (Hornaday, 2006).

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